

Where are the Bob Dylan remasters?

by Peter Stone Brown

One of the great and one of the most fun trends of the record business over the last decade has been the remastered album. The casual observer might cynically say this is just another marketing ploy, but for music fans and collectors – as well as anyone with ears there are quite a few reasons for remastering.

When the great LP to CD conversion began, many of the transfers were sloppy at best and those who knew their albums well noticed. The Beatles catalog is still a source of controversy. About a year ago a friend of mine bought a new high-end sound system and invited me to hear it. He put on the remastered *Rubber Soul*. English version (different song selection) aside, it was not the album I remembered as the lack of electric guitars in the mix was severely lacking.

The Band was also a victim of poor CD remastering (finally rectified this year). I wondered if the engineer even bothered to listen to the original album. In the case of *Stage Fright* for some reason they used a different mix entirely and key parts to songs were missing.

The best of the remasters are usually done with great care, including updated liner notes with historical perspective, detailed session info and to the joy of any fan or collector, bonus tracks.

Missing in all this fun is the man who is arguably the most important and most influential American musician of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, Bob Dylan.

So far, three collections *Biograph*, *The Bootleg Series, Vol. 1-3* and the bizarrely titled *Greatest Hits Vol. 3* have been remastered, but only one regular Dylan album, *Street-Legal*.

If there is anyone's catalog deserving of this, not to mention one that holds tremendous promise, it's Dylan's. For one thing, the majority of LP to CD transfers were shoddily done from the sound to the artwork. And for another, there are the hundreds of outtakes and alternate versions of songs that many Dylan fans claim are just as good if not better than what has been released.

The most controversial CD reissue would have to be *Blonde On Blonde*. On the initial CD, songs were cut, most notably "Sad Eyed Lady of the Lowlands," and it took three more tries to get it approaching being close to correct on the "gold" CD. And no one

knows what correct is anyway because *Blonde On Blonde* as an LP had two different mixes, stereo and mono, with the stereo tracks being longer and in the case of the song "One Of Us Must Know," the stereo version had an organ solo not on the mono version. Dylan's two preceding albums *Highway 61 Revisited* and *Bringing It All Back Home* also share the stereo versus mono controversy. British writer, Roger Ford has examined both albums intensively and his findings can be found on the web: <http://www.rdf.pwp.blueyonder.co.uk/index.htm>

If *Blonde On Blonde* ever is remastered and remixed, the controversy will still rage among Dylan fans as many prefer the original mono mix, reportedly the only mix Dylan was actually involved with. As Ford expertly points out, the possibilities are endless and fascinating. Is there really a different drum track on "Fourth Time Around" or just a different mix, and what is that keyboard clearly audible on the stereo LP, but barely audible or not there at all on the mono LP and gold CD?

So why of all albums was *Street-Legal* the first to be remastered? The album was panned severely on release. Greil Marcus' *Rolling Stone* review was titled, "Never So Utterly Fake." While one song, "Baby Stop Crying" was a hit in England, the album was pretty much a dud in America.

Let's go back in time a little bit. 1978 as far as the media was concerned was get Dylan year. Dylan had been off the road since the Rolling Thunder Revue dissolved in 1976. His TV special *Hard Rain* was a critical disaster though now it can be viewed as a revolutionary precursor to punk. He'd been through a nasty divorce, which had quite a bit of publicity in the gossip columns. The year started with a media barrage astonishing for someone who made it quite clear he despised the press. There were more interviews than any Dylan fan could ever hope for in every possible magazine with his photo on the cover of every one. All were done to promote his movie *Renaldo and Clara*, shot during the first Rolling Thunder Revue tour. The movie was another critical disaster. Four hours long with an astounding 50 songs, the film had brilliant in-concert footage interspersed with impromptu scenes of amateurish acting and no discernible story line. The *Village Voice* sent out an assassination squad to review it. The film died a quick death. America in particular wanted its movies neat and clean and *Renaldo and Clara* was anything but neat and clean.

Then Dylan started his largest tour ever, a world tour with his largest band ever, and the first band he truly put together by himself. In the wake of Elvis Presley's death, he donned a costume that maybe Elvis would wear, and added stage patter to his show, in addition to

shaking the hands of the front row during “Ballad of a Thin Man.” On top of that, he radically rearranged his songs more dramatically than ever before. “Don’t Think Twice” was reggae-ized, “Blowin’ In The Wind,” a slow anthem, “Maggie’s Farm,” some sort of disco/funk/metal something or other. Sometimes the arrangements worked. Sometimes they didn’t. The band often seemed plodding, the music heavy-handed and overdone, everything the exact opposite of what even the most casual fan would expect from Bob Dylan.

Dylan came back from touring Japan and Australia, hired Elvis’ bass player and recorded *Street-Legal* in one week at his rehearsal studio using a remote recording truck.

Now Dylan was and still pretty much is of the old school when it comes to recording. He likes to do it live and spontaneously and as far as he is concerned, a recording is a recording of a song.

Dylan’s ’78 band was large. Nine musicians and three backup singers. Dylan didn’t want to use headphones, which meant that monitors had to be used so the musicians could hear themselves. This just isn’t done in a recording studio because the monitors bleed back and you can’t truly isolate and cleanly mix the tracks. This didn’t go over big in 1978.

The result was Dylan’s most alienated album ever and one that didn’t fail to alienate many of its listeners.

I loved it from the start and still do. Not all of it, but most of it.

Either the day it came out, or the next day, there was a disc jockey on WMMR, the number one rock station in Philadelphia at the time named Steven Clean. He played the entire album without interruption from start to finish and at the end said, “What an amazing Bob Dylan album!” The next week Steven Clean was history at WMMR and I’ve always wondered whether it was *Street-Legal* that did him in.

One of the things that alienated people about the album was the backup singers. They were present on every song echoing every line or so it seemed. Who did Dylan think he was? Ray Charles? Elvis? Van Morrison? And unlike those singers, Dylan made no attempt to change his singing style or sing with the backup singers.

And then there was the sound of the album. It sounded like it was recorded through a blanket or something. You’d have to strain to hear the organ, or the violin, or even the guitars. It was one big mess in terms of what was happening sonically in 1978.

So was this apparent mess worth remastering? Most definitely. For one thing there's the opening "Changing Of The Guards." While cynics will say Dylan's use of Steve Douglas' sax is a cop from Springsteen, this is one of Dylan's most timeless songs. The opening line "16 years, 16 banners united" certainly refers to the amount of years Dylan had been in the spotlight and the second verse notes his arrival, "Fortune calls. I stepped forth from the shadows to the marketplace..."

But it's not so much what the song is about as the feeling of the song. As the song continues the lyrics seem to go further back in time spanning centuries, but the feeling is one of supreme alienation, of things disintegrating and crumbling, with tremendous foreboding for the future.

The next three songs of what was originally Side one are interesting if not totally successful. "New Pony" is perhaps the nastiest blues song Dylan ever recorded and for once the back-up singers don't echo his lines, but chant throughout "How much longer?"

"No Time To Think" is one of the most interesting failures Dylan has ever created. The melody is almost like a Broadway show tune, with the first line of each alternating verse (for all intents and purposes a chorus) tossing out random concepts such as: "Equality, liberty, humility, simplicity," or "Socialism, hypnotism, patriotism, materialism." Yet hidden in the song are some very scary lines like, "Fools making laws for the breaking of jaws," or this one which was brought to light during the last presidency, "In the Federal City you been blown and shown pity..."

"Baby Please Stop Crying" sounds like Dylan trying to write a Dylan song.

However, what was originally the second side of the album is where the power of *Street-Legal* comes through. Dylan was criticized for being misogynistic on "Is Your Love In Vain?" but I see it as the song of a totally broken man who does not - or thinks he doesn't want to fall in love again. And if he does fall in love again, he wants the person who's in love with him to understand exactly what she's getting into: "When I am in the darkness, why do you intrude?"

"Senor (Tales Of Yankee Power)," the one song from the album Dylan continues to perform with some regularity is classic. One of his spookiest songs ever, it's like "Waiting For Godot" in Mexico or maybe Chile, or some Peruvian jungle. But maybe none of the above. Dylan

plays with time and space here, one second perhaps in medieval times with a gypsy caravan, the next perhaps in a recording studio ("Let's overturn these tables, disconnect these cables.") It is one the more fully realized arrangements on any Dylan album.

"True Love Tends To Forget," is a song unfortunately overlooked. It is everything "Baby Please Stop Crying" isn't: "I'm getting weary looking in my baby's eyes/When she's near me, she's so hard to recognize." The song, perhaps about "a weekend in hell" is the perfect lead into "We Better Talk This Over," one of Dylan's most direct and compassionate love songs, and one I always felt would've been perfect for Waylon Jennings to cover. We can only assume it's about the end of his marriage, but we'll never know for sure, but the standout line, "It'd be great to cross paths in a day and a half Look at each other and laugh" makes me think it is.

"Where Are You Tonight? (Journey Through Dark Heat)" concludes the album as strongly as it began. Musically, almost a rewrite of "Like A Rolling Stone," like "Changing Of The Guards," the verses hint strongly this is autobiographical: "The truth was obscure, too profound and too pure, to live it you have to explode," or"

"There's a babe in the arms of a woman in a rage  
And a longtime golden-haired stripper onstage  
And she winds back the clock and she turns back the page  
Of a book that nobody can write."

So what did remastering *Street-Legal* accomplish? A lot actually, and it's evident from the first note. There's that ringing rhythm acoustic guitar clear as a bell on "Changing of the Guards," (not to mention an extra 30 seconds or so of music after the original fade-out), but there's a clarity and punch to the entire album that wasn't on the original CD or LP for that matter. The bass is defined, the drums kick, you'll hear instruments you never heard before and the muffled sound is gone. So in the few weeks until Dylan's new album "*Love And Theft*" appears, consider *Street-Legal* a Dylan album well worth reexamining.

